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ABSTRACT

This document describes research and development by the Institute for Responsive Education's national project (known as the League of Schools Reaching Out) that seeks to show how school-family-community partnerships (SFCPs) can contribute significantly to school restructuring or reform aimed at increasing the academic and social success of all children, especially those at risk. The League of Schools Reaching Out is a network of 70 schools in 22 states that serve a substantial number of low-income children. A mail survey, telephone interviews with approximately 16 principals, and site visits to schools in 8 urban districts concerning the policies and practices in League schools were conducted. Four conclusions are highlighted: (1) many League schools show that family-community-school collaboration can be productive in schools where most of the families are poor, in disadvantaged and troubled communities, and in districts experiencing political instability and budget cutbacks; (2) many League schools are embracing old-fashioned ideas about schooling; (3) Chapter 1 is a good but largely untapped policy source of financial support for strengthening SFCPs; and (4) federal and state policies make a difference. Project components, such as financial arrangements, action research, training and orientation, and multiple data sources, are discussed. The design works, and research is difficult in real-world school settings. (RLC)

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THE LEAGUE OF SCHOOLS REACHING OUT: A Progress Report on Collaborative National Research and Action Project about Family and Community Collaboration

Prepared for the April 1992 Conference of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco

by Don Davies, co-director, Center on Families, Communities, Schools, and Children's Learning, Boston University, and President, Institute for Responsive Education

The Center on Families, Communities, Schools, and Children's Learning has as its central organizing framework the concept of the shared and overlapping responsibilities of families, communities, and schools for the social and academic success of all children. Through several longitudinal projects we are seeking to learn what strategies work and under what conditions to make this concept of shared responsibility operational. Several of these projects are collaborative efforts involving Center researchers, school administrators and teachers, parents, and community representatives. In these projects school practitioners and parents are asked to be partners in research as well as in school improvement activities. Such partnerships have high potential, but they are also fraught with problems and have important administrative and policy implications.

In this paper I want to discuss one project that is collaborative in two important ways. First, it is a collaboration between the Research and Development Center which Joyce Epstein and I direct

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together and the Institute for Responsive Education and its national reform project known as the League of Schools Reaching Out. The Center is funded by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI) in the Department of Education and the Department of Health and Human Services. The League of Schools Reaching Out is on the other hand funded by several private foundations: including The Pew Charitable Trusts, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, the Plan for Social Excellence, the Aaron Diamond Foundation, the Leon Lowenstein Foundation, and the Boston Globe Foundation.

This is an unusual collaboration as it involves several public and private sources of funding and joint sponsorship by a Research and Development Center located in five universities and a non-profit organization long known for its advocacy of citizen participation. From my point of view the complexity of sponsorship and funding is largely a plus factor in terms of visibility, credibility, access to resources, multiple channels for communication, and potential national impact. Other than the fact that it takes a while to explain, and a lot of complicated reporting, I have not found any important problems with this form of organizational collaboration.

The second and much more significant and interesting kind of collaboration is between the Center and IRE on the one hand and teachers, parents, and administrators in League schools. This is

the main focus of this presentation, but first I must offer some context about what the League is and why it exists.

What is the League of Schools Reaching Out?

The League is a national project of IRE, directly connected as well to the R&D Center, which seeks to show how school-family-community partnerships can contribute significantly to school restructuring or reform aimed at increasing the academic and social success of all children, especially those the society labels as "at-risk." It is a network of schools which was begun with in the spring of 1990 and now has 70 schools in 22 states, plus Puerto Rico and the District of Columbia. Most are urban and public, with a small number of private schools and a few rural schools in poverty areas. Most are elementary, but there are several at the early learning pre-school level, some middle schools, and three or four high schools. All are schools that serve a substantial number of low-income children. Schools became members by submitting a written application -- using a form which IRE provided -- prepared by a group of key people in the school -- principal, parents, teachers, and representatives of other community agencies, with the review and decisions made by a staff committee.

IRE seeks to embue the League overall and its member schools with two ideas:

*** that all children can learn and achieve social and academic success, including those children that are considered most at-risk,

least likely to succeed. This is a radical and a powerful idea which challenges the conventional belief in many American schools that some students (often a substantial percentage) are destined not to "make it," who can benefit little from the school's offerings because of the characteristics of their families or communities and their own perceived disabilities and deficits, such as lack of motivation, laziness, or a temperaments unsuited to academic work.

*** that such an ambitious goal as success for all children can only be achieved through the combined and coordinated efforts of school staff, families, and other community agencies and resources. The ethos is of partnership with and mutually beneficial and continuous communication and exchange among the school, family, and community. These partnerships become the school's standard way of doing business rather than an occasional event (a open house for parents, a celebration sponsored by a local business). These twin ideas --success for all children and partnership -- represent a distinctly different mind set or vision of the inclusiveness of schools' objectives and the centrality of the idea of the overlapping responsibilities of families, communities, and schools.

The League and School Reform....

We hope to show policymakers, opinion makers, educators -- and specialists across the country how success for all and family and community partnerships can be a part of school redesign, reform, or restructuring.

Survey of Practices

The first collaborative effort with the League and the Center was a study in our first year, 1990-1991. We surveyed the policies and practices in League schools, using a mail questionnaire, telephone interviews with about 16 principals, and site visits by our researchers to schools in 8 urban districts.

In addition, for purposes of contrast we visited a small number of control schools in the same eight school districts and a small number of private and parochial schools. The results of the survey have just been published in a center report entitled, The Portrait of Schools Reaching Out. Briefly, I will summarize here some of the main conclusions.

CONCLUSION ONE. Many of these League schools are showing that productive family-community-school collaboration is possible in schools in which most of the families are poor, schools which are located in communities that are described as poor, disadvantaged, troubled, experiencing severe social problems and in school districts with severe problems of political instability and budget cutbacks. The fact that it can be done -- in such circumstances -- is proof against the traditional "excuse" offered by many educators -- "We would like to involve the parents but it can't be done because of the kinds of families or the kinds of communities we serve."

CONCLUSION TWO. The schools we surveyed have a diverse and impressive array of activities. Some of the interesting trends and developments that the study shows are

a. 50% of the schools have established parent or family centers -- a physical space in the school set aside for parents to use as a meeting place, usually with comfortable furniture, a coffee pot, a telephone, books and materials for children, and a parent or community person to serve as coordinator. Many of the schools report that the parent center is a low-cost, easy to administer mechanism -- that also has great symbolic importance -- it offers parents a room of their own. It seems to be easy to administer, low-cost, high payoff technique.

b. About 40% of the schools report initiating home visitor or family support programs to take information and help to many families who do not come to the school.

c. Although hardly a new idea, many schools report the importance of having special staff -- usually paid community people -- to organize and manage the family and community outreach activities.

d. About half of the schools are providing materials and encouragement to parents to help their own children with learning at home. (Dorothy Rich's Home and School Institute and Joyce Epstein's TIPS program are good examples.)

e. There are an astonishing number of business partnerships. Most of the schools report six or more. These range from a local pizza parlor that provides prizes for student contests, to the use of laid off Ford Motor Plant workers as tutors and aides, to

comprehensive partnerships with big corporations and banks.

f. Most of the schools are making a start on working with other community agencies -- hospitals, community mental health centers, social service centers to coordinate their efforts to serve families and children. A few have developed full-scale programs for integrating services. These are real examples to match the widespread talk and the recommendations about schools as one stop social service providers.

g. Nearly all are bringing family members to the school as tutors, helpers, aides, and mentors.

h. Nearly all the schools report having parent associations and/or school site councils. But these mechanisms are not given very high priority by the principals, who were surveyed.

i. Every school is trying a variety of ways of communicating with families -- automatic telephone calling, newsletters in several languages, more frequent parent conferences, many varieties of multicultural events to attract parents to the school. Several are working with community media -- cable companies, small, ethnic radio stations to broadcast their announcements and do special programming.

CONCLUSION THREE. Many of the League schools in our survey are moving fairly dramatically to embrace two very "old-fashioned" ideas that seem to have regained currency in our post-modern educational world. The first is the idea of "the community school," as long promoted by the Mott Foundation -- the school as a

community institution, serving in a variety of responsive ways the community's residents, agencies, and institutions -- and drawing on the resources of the community for the benefit of the school curriculum, children, and the parents. Some schools are operating much like a settlement house in the early parts of this century. The second is what we used to call the concept of "the whole child." This concept means simply that the school needs to be concerned positively about all aspects of the childhood development -- not just with filling his or her brain -- physical. emotional, moral, social, and academic. This point reinforces the message that James Comer has been delivering so eloquently for at least two decades now.

CONCLUSION FOUR. Few of the schools have been able yet to initiate broad and comprehensive programs that cut across all six of the categories that the Center is using to analyzing school-family-community partnerships. (These are Joyce Epstein's five categories plus one more: community-school exchanges.)

CONCLUSION FIVE. The principal seems to be the key. The most powerful single policy influence seems to be the principal's objectives -- stated or not, procedures, and actions. Without exception in our field visits, impressive and effective reaching out strategies could be tied to principal's leadership and support.

CONCLUSION SIX. Few strategies are initiated by or aimed at

classroom teachers. Few schools report giving substantial attention to helping classroom teachers develop new knowledge or skills or attitudes that would be more conducive to reaching out activities. Few in service training and staff development activities are reported; not many of the strategies bring teachers and parents together in a sustained way. The infrequent reports of teacher leadership or involvement may help to explain our impression that not many of the reaching out strategies appear to be closely linked to strategies for strengthening or changing the curriculum or to new approaches to teaching and learning.

CONCLUSION SEVEN. We conclude that Chapter 1 is a good but largely untapped policy tool and source of financial support for strengthening family-community-school partnerships. Our mail survey and telephone interviews revealed that only a few principals are taking advantages of the changes in Ch. 1 in the Stafford-Hawkins Amendments of 1988 which allow and encourage the use of Ch. 1 funds for a wide variety of parent involvement and parent education activities. About a third of our respondents from these very select schools were not even aware that of the Ch. 1 changes.

CONCLUSION EIGHT. The study suggests that Federal and state policies do make a difference in the level and quality of activity and in strategies.

The Action Research Project

The survey has some valuable material but -- as is often the case with surveys of this kind -- it leaves many, many unanswered questions. Both the useful results and limitations point us in some important directions for the remaining four years of the project. In the fall we began a three year project in nine League schools -- in which we are using action research methodology to document and study the results of various kinds of interventions.* (Names of schools, principals, and facilitators are appended.)

Purposes of the Study and Research Questions

This multi-site multi-year action research project seeks to learn how schools that want to reach out to implement programs and strategies to influence student and family learning, and how policies can support or hinder these efforts. We think that the work will produce data that will be useful on three fronts:

* To help practitioners and planners understand what interventions work for what results and under what conditions (complementing the work of Joyce Epstein along these same lines).
* To help others who may want to replicate or adapt such approaches to understand successful approaches to and difficulties of implementation of interventions.
* To provide specific guidance to local, state, and Federal policymakers who want to encourage family-community-school collaboration.

In the research we are asking three research questions, that we explored in a more general way in the Year 1 survey:

1. What policies (formal and informal) have what kinds of results at the local school and community level on the objectives and implementation of programmatic efforts to increase family, school, community collaboration?
2. What programmatic components and strategies do "reaching out schools choose and how do they implement these? What factors, barriers, and policies impede or facilitate the implementation of such components? What are the actual costs of these efforts?
3. What are the effects of components and strategies that are implemented on children's and families learning, attitudes, and behavior?

We knew from the beginning that we needed to gain inside information about two kinds of policies -- formal and informal; about the nature, interaction, and effects of three levels of policy -- local, state, and national; and about the interaction between context -- school, community, cultural -- and policy and program.

Components of the Project

From the outset we believed that a highly collaborative approach to the study was essential for two reasons: a) an externally imposed study probably wouldn't work and wouldn't reveal much inside, grassroots perspective, and b) we are ideologically

committed to collaboration with parents, teachers, and school officials in both research and in action. The main elements of the project include:

1. Choice of schools

We wanted willing school partners who explicitly shared our ideological commitment to success for all children and a collaborative approach to achieve it. We issued a detailed RFP in the late spring to all League members describing the ideology, the requirements, the methodology, the financial conditions, and the possible benefits. We received about 20 proposals and used a staff committee process to select nine schools in eight project sites (One project has two schools.) The selected schools entered into a written agreement with IRE and the Center. Among the criteria used in selection were our interest in having geographic diversity (with at least one rural project) and different sizes and levels of schools. (The sites selected are in San Diego, Minneapolis, Chicago, Richmond, Virginia,the Ferguson-Florissant School District near St. Louis, Boston, and Atenville, West Virginia. There is an infant and toddler project (0-3); five elementary schools, and three middle schools.) A site visit by a staff member was made to each school selected before a final decision was made. A key factor in the selection was evidence of strong commitment by the school principal. This was one important implication of the first year Portrait study.

2. Financial arrangements

Small grants ranging from $5,000 to $21,000 were negotiated. Each school was expected to offer matching funds, including some money. This didn't turn out to be a problem, with one exception. Assuming mutual satisfaction with the collaboration, grants will be renewed for each of the next two and a half years. The funds are to help with the implementation of the proposed intervention as well as research costs. They come largely from IRE's foundation funds not from the Center on Families. In addition, the League provides the salary of a part-time site facilitator.

3. Action Research

We knew that the research questions we were asking required an authentic grassroots perspective. We know from our own substantial experience with action research methodology and from the experience of many others how difficult this approach can be, and how rewarding. We know how skeptical many other researchers are of this "messy" approach where reality sometimes conquers rigor. Nonetheless, for us it was the only way to go.

In a predecessor Schools Reaching Out project we had used a teacher action research approach (Krasnow, 1990) with some considerable success. The action research proved to be useful as a data gathering device but also a project intervention to involve teachers. We decided to add to both the risk and the potential of the approach by adding parents to the equation. In each school we require that a parent-teacher action research be formed

consistently of at least two parents and two teachers. The team, with the outside facilitator, is the primary data gathering mechanism. The action research approach, with its parent-teacher teams, is both a data gathering means and an important element to be studied in each case study.

4. Outside help from IRE and the Center

We know that on-site assistance to the school and the team is essential in a project such as this. We are providing an IRE staff person employed for eight days a month to work on site in each school. With one exception (The Minneapolis project is providing site facilitators from the University of Minnesota through another funded research project.) The facilitator was selected in a collaborative process by the staff of the League in Boston, the school principal, other school staff, and parents.

We believed that it was important that the facilitator be the school's choice as well as ours. In most cases there were multiple applicants for the position and the selection was made by a small committee. Interest and experience in case study research and/or action research and demonstrated ability to work with urban (or rural) school staff and parents were two primary criteria.

In addition to the site facilitator, the project provides

a) the assistance -- by site visits and telephone -- of a consultant from the IRE staff who is experienced in action research, Jean Krasnow.

b) the assistance of the principal investigator (Don Davies) and

two Center researchers (Patricia Burch and Ameetha Palanki) who maintain telephone contact with each school (at least bi-weekly) and are available to trouble shoot and offer encouragement or ideas through an 800- telephone number.

c) the regular services of the League of Schools Reaching Out (a staff of three in Boston, producing a newsletter, working papers, and providing a flow of reports and publications, including all of the Center's reports, directories, and newsletters and our magazine Equity and Choice.

5. Training and orientation

In a complex multi-site project with multiple interests and agenda being served many ways need to be found to build cohesion, trust, and common understandings. The beginning of these efforts on our part took the form of a three day training and orientation meeting in Boston for teams of principals and teachers from each school, the site facilitators, and IRE staff and consultants. Such an event is expensive both in money and time for planning and execution, but vitally important. A second such meeting is envisioned for mid-way in the project, but may be beyond what the budget will allow. Continuing, informal "training" is being provided by the IRE consultant and research staff.

6. Multiple sources of data

The richness and usefulness of the case studies from the sites and the overall report that will look across sites will depend on our ability to tap a wide variety of data sources. Triangulation will

be essential to test some of the key findings from each site. The sources that we are using include these:

a) a common set of survey instruments being administered near the beginning of each project and again near the end: two for parents and two for teachers. The instruments were developed and tested at the University of Minnesota. In most cases the parent instruments are being done through interviews with a sample of parents by members of the action research team.

b) data about the community and the school gathered throughout the studies by the facilitator, using instruments developed by the Boston staff. These data will include data on student achievement, attendance, and student behavioral indicators.

c) a journal kept by the facilitator

d) running notes kept by Boston staff on telephone conversations and correspondence kept by Boston staff

e) the journal of the chief action research consultant

f) the parent-teacher action research team -- notes of meetings, interviews, activities

g) data from other parallel but appropriate projects, studies, and evaluations in the school

Progress

The data for the substance of the first year of the study are still being collected and have not been analyzed. However, I want to offer my early and tentative impressions about how well the collaboration -- as collaboration -- is working.

1. The design seems to be sound.

The need for key elements of the project design are being confirmed: careful site selection, written agreements, on-site help by a facilitator supplemented by extensive staff assistance from Boston, the importance of training, team building and orientation, the importance of multiple data sources, the need for outside financial support to make the intervention and the research possible outside of the school district's budget.

2. The difficulty of doing research in difficult, real world school settings.

Our expectations about the difficulties of doing this kind of research have not been changed nor our anxieties relieved. The culture, traditions, and conditions of schools -- especially those in troubled urban settings -- are not "friendly" for research and reflection. I am often amazed that our collaborating colleagues are willing to continue to collaborate with us, given the difficulties and pressures of their lives in the schools.

The pressures on urban school principals are especially great. Most of them are genuinely committed to the project and to finding answers to the questions being raised; but few can give the time and energy that they would like. In exasperation over some glitches in communication about the research component in one school, one of the principals said: "I'm running a school. I can't be a researcher."

3. The difficulty of making the action research team concept work in practice.

I believe that this will be the most difficult part of the design. There is virtually no experience in the schools for working in collaborative teams of any kind, let alone teams that are expected to ask questions, get answers, reflect, and plan action based on the results of their inquiries. When the teams include parents, there has been even less experience and the task becomes even more difficult.

These are early impressions. The project is still very new. It will take us the full three years or longer to know whether a collaborative approach to research on parent and community involvement projects can yield valuable information on project effects.

Our experiences so far suggest that collaborative research with schools may prove to be a kind of balancing act. How can we give participating schools the flexibility to design projects which are responsive to their school communities' needs while at the same time providing the structure, direction and even routine which can to help insure that the project produces valuable data? How can we encourage full participation of parents, principals and teachers in the project while acknowledging the demands and constraints which they face? How can we help schools focus more directly on student outcomes as we encourage them to pay attention to process?

The points of balance like parent and community involvement itself will vary from school to school. Our hope is that at the end of three years we will have a good idea of what kind of collaborative research works best and under what conditions.

Concluding Thoughts

In spite of the difficulties, we are encouraged that the project can make a difference for children. Our first year study showed that many League schools are energetically extending their parent and community involvement programs. What is missing is comprehensive planning, implementation and evaluation of programs which can help schools build programs which make a difference for children.

It may take schools more than three years for to feel comfortable in combining action with reflection to produce meaningful research. But, news from the field suggests that they are ready for a challenge. In the words of Darlene Dalton, principal of the Atenville Elementary School in Atenville, West Virginia, "This isn't a two and a half year project. This a ten year project. We plan to be looking for ways to help our children, today and a long ways down the road."

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